

ON BEING PROGRESSIVE

**Is the term 'progressive' useful
and how do we define it?**

Grace Barnett

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By Grace Barnett

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About Compass and this project

Compass is platform for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build networks of ideas, parties and organisations to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resources and policy we call [45° Change](#). The question we are trying to help solve, as we endeavour to #BuildBackBetter, is not just what sort of society we want, but, increasingly, how to make it happen?

Introduction

“Progressive” is a word that we use a lot at Compass to describe who we are and what we stand for. It’s understood as a shorthand for a roughly centre Left positioning, which is socially liberal, favours redistributive economic policy, and protects the interests of the worst-off in society. In many ways it is an extremely useful term, because it's concise and lets us tap into a rich historical context, while also looking to the future with a necessary sense of optimism.

On General Election day in 2017, Compass released a video called *How to be a Progressive*. Here we put forward a working definition of the term, built around the guiding principles democracy, equality, and sustainability. The video placed present day Progressives within the tradition of celebrated social struggles past and present, like the suffragettes, the formation of the welfare state, and the LGBT+ rights movement, Black Lives Matter, and Extinction Rebellion. Here, then, to be Progressive means above all else to oppose intolerance and injustice, and challenge any status quo which supports those values. The video also endorses the spirit of collective responsibility, saying that “It’s on all of us to make change possible.”

The video goes on to say that Progressives believe in seeing the best in people and favour the carrot over the stick. The term actively avoids party allegiances, saying that the challenge is too big to be owned by any one person or group. It asserts that the drive for change can only be lead from the ground up, but needs the support and the resources of the State to have meaningful impact. Finally, the piece ends with a call for cooperation and collaboration, as this is the best chance for us to build a future that is “social, liberal, and green”.

The term “Progressive” has served Compass well since membership was opened up beyond the Labour Party. As an organisation that wants to transcend party identities to form a loose coalition made up of “all parties, and none”, when we say we are Progressive we can situate ourselves within a tradition which highlights the values our supporters share. “Progressive” is a fundamentally subjective term, and so far we have succeeded in turning that subjectivity into a strength. But a lot has changed since May 2017. In recent years the term has been claimed by almost every major party in British politics in recent years¹. Is it in danger of losing all useful meaning?

If we want to keep using this word, then, we need to be clear about what it means to us. This is an attempt to dig into the history and application of the term, and to interrogate some of the potential points of pain or contradiction, with the aim of creating a clearer picture of where we stand today as self-described Progressives. Does “Progressive” still accurately describe our philosophy? How do others use it and does this matter? Does it bear any relation to the Left-Right political spectrum? Can we say what

is definitely not progressive? Answering these questions should help us to assess more clearly the way we use this word and whether we want to continue doing so.

Historical Context

A simple and accessible definition of Progressive is someone who believes in the possibility and desirability of progress. That is, that people can and should work to make society better over time. Things become more complicated when we start to consider the nature of that progress, and the form it should take.

This understanding of society on a linear path of progress or decline is in fact relatively modern. It found early expression in late eighteenth century through the work of Adam Smith², who argued that the pursuit of economic growth was a key requirement for social progress, and that the material and spiritual conditions in which we live can be improved through human endeavour. Indeed, the power of capitalism as a generator of wealth, innovation, and prosperity has powered truly remarkable advances in science, technology, and living standards throughout the modern era. However, we are also keenly aware today of the consequences of unchecked economic and technical progress in the form of the climate crisis, and ever-growing inequality.

What's more, when we follow this understanding of progress through to its logical conclusion, we find it supporting and reproducing some ideas which now look rather regressive. The deference to modernity, rationality, and technological innovation that characterises this kind of progress is steeped in colonial conceptions of civilised vs barbarous societies, and the moral duty of the former to educate or subjugate the latter.

The philosopher John Gray goes further still, arguing that these Enlightenment thinkers were simply reproducing the Christian narrative, that human society has a clearly defined and utopian endpoint. Gray argues that when we are constantly striving for something better, we are inclined to overlook the consequences of our actions in the present. Furthermore, assuming that human progress is cumulative and irreversible leads to a dangerous complacency³.

So, already it is clear that "progress" alone is not enough. We have to be thoughtful and clear about exactly what kind of progress we want. The framework of the "Good Society" has been used by Compass in the past to help guide this thinking. It's important also to remember that progress can also be understood cyclically, as with the seasons. This approach is applied effectively to politics and governance through the metaphor of the gardener in Sue Goss' Garden Mind.

Going back to the Enlightenment, some thinkers like John Stuart Mill also

drew distinction between material and moral progress, suggesting that economic progress is only valuable so long as people are living in poverty. He argued that once a state of general wealth had been achieved, “There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on.”⁴ This is an important dimension to remember. Such thinking is reflected today, for example, in the [Degrowth movement](#), which challenges the growth-at-all costs philosophy in favour of redistribution of wealth and a general reduction in the size of the global economy. This needs to be accompanied by mindset change, towards a society which values care and solidarity over material wealth. Such an approach is arguably much more “progressive”, in terms of making society better, than the traditional "growth first" approach.

So, when we use the word “Progressive” to describe our politics we need to be conscious of its complexity, and clear in our minds about the kind of Progress we want. If we are to advocate for the abandonment of a century’s old linear model of progress, we also need to be willing to try different ways of thinking and talking about what a successful society looks like.

Who's progressive now?

As we have already seen term “Progressive”, is extremely subjective and porous, and this can be both a strength and a weakness. When used as a political label its meaning can become even more slippery. To help ground this exploration, it will be useful to see how others have used the term in the past. What can they teach us about what Progressivism can look like, and how does that relate to the ways we use the word today?

For clarity, this report will limit itself to uses of the term in British politics⁵. The earliest uses relate to the alliance between the Liberal Party and the newly emergent Labour Party in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The alliance was built on the assumption that the new and inexperienced Labour party would represent the working classes and push for radical social change, while Liberals could use their experience and access to power to translate these into effective policies which were palatable to the middle classes. Some even went as far as to describe this Progressive Alliance as “The new Progressive party, with its Liberal and Labour wings” which represented an equal counterbalance to the political Right.

This is the foundation we’re building on when we talk about being progressive in British politics: an alliance of (social) Liberalism and socialism, acting as an equal counterbalance to conservatism. Today we have to add sustainability to a new progressive triumvirate of Red, Liberal

and Green, or the similar triptych more equal, democratic and sustainable. This approach is echoed in Compass' work: both explicitly through its 2017 Progressive Alliance campaign, and implicitly through its continual efforts to facilitate trust and relationship building between political parties, and other organisations, with overlapping values and compatible aims.

The same logic was also in play in the run up to the 1997 General Election. Having lost four successive General Elections, Labour was actively working with the Lib Dems behind the scenes on a "Progressive Alliance" style agreement⁶. The New Labour project saw in the "Progressive" brand a chance to distance itself from words like "socialist" or even "Left wing", which carried some negative connotations, and working with the Lib Dems helped bring some credibility to that position. As a much smaller partner, the Lib Dems were able to get some big policy pieces, like electoral reform, on the agenda.

As used by New Labour, the word "Progressive" was a tool for holding together a loose coalition of social liberalism, redistributive economics, and economic liberalism rooted in capitalist thinking. The party promised not to abandon capitalism, but to harness its formidable wealth generating capacity for more people. It also laid out ambitious and radical plans for constitutional and electoral reform. In the end, though, New Labour disappointed many Progressive hopes, and was widely accused of failing to meaningfully challenge the neoliberal consensus⁷. Many felt that size of Labour's victory meant it felt able to abandon its agreement with the Lib Dems, and commitments to ambitious electoral reform ended up limited to partial reform of the House of Lords⁸.

The New Labour project therefore illustrates the powerful alliance-building potential of the word "Progressive" but also the consequences of not being seen to follow through on those values. In fact, a surprising consequence of New Labour's abandonment of Progressive principles was the co-option of the tag by none other than the Conservative Party. A 2007 pamphlet, "[Who's Progressive Now?](#)", written by Jeremy Hunt and Greg Clarke identifies 6 dimensions of Progressive politics: a belief in Progress, respect for diversity, active concern for the less fortunate, antipathy for unmerited hierarchies, a concern for social as well as economic goals, a sense of responsibility for the future. For each dimension, the authors set out why they believe that the Conservative Party under Cameron occupies that space more convincingly than Labour.

Although it is easy, after 10 years of Conservative austerity, to scoff at Hunt's insistence (for example) that it is his party that [really cares about eradicating child poverty](#), and takes the climate change more seriously because "Conservative councils lead the way in recycling", we can also find some ideas which would not be out of place in a Compass publication. Take, for example, the importance of the role of civil society in driving social change ("the power of trusting people, families, and communities"), a commitment to devolution, and localism ("It should be obvious that our restrictive, one-size-fits-all power structures are robbing local

communities of choice, autonomy and self-respect”), and celebration of diversity.

But this report does not reflect Progressive values. Taking aside the fact that the paper reads more like an exercise in political posturing than genuine policy proposal and the aforementioned regressive policies of the Coalition and Conservative governments in which Hunt and Clarke were key players, the fact remains that the reforms proposed by this paper are relatively minor. They do not represent a genuine attempt to address the deep inequalities and injustices identified. The focus is on making the status quo more palatable, rather than mounting a robust challenge to its foundational assumptions.

For example, lack of representation of ethnic minorities, women, and the less well off in elected positions has roots in regressive ideas, deeply engrained in the way we live and move through the world. To suggest that this can be addressed entirely, for example, by the introduction of priority candidate lists is absurd. Likewise extreme wealth inequality is justified simply on the grounds that “great merit should be greatly rewarded”, with no attempt made to tackle the complexities and contradictions in that statement.

For all its flaws, though, this report is a powerful reminder of the danger of assuming that any group owns being “Progressive”. Admittedly, if we agree that a prerequisite of Progressivism is challenging the status quo, then it seems unlikely that the Conservative party could occupy this space as things stand. Having dominated the political and ideological landscape for the past 50 years, it feels unlikely that we will see an appetite for radical reform, redistribution of wealth and power, or restructuring of society emerging from within their ranks.

But let’s not forget that one of Compass’ core values is that Progressive politics can never be owned by one person or party. The Conservatives have undergone [significant ideological transformations in the past](#), so they could hypothetically inhabit a Progressive space in the future, at least as individuals or on policy issues. We need to recall that Harold MacMillan built more council houses than Labour and Mrs Thatcher more comprehensive schools.

We must never forget the importance of clarity and rigour in both setting out our values and living up to our word, whatever language we use. To assume that Progress belongs to the Left is to breed complacency, intellectual laziness, and lack of ambition. Progressivism, then, is not a political identity, but a mindset. Political parties can be efficient vehicles for effecting change through the ballot box, and Left-Right descriptors can be a useful shorthand to help understand people’s values and priorities, but no one has a monopoly on Progress.

Individualism and Collectivism

If a Progressive mindset is characterised by this appetite for meaningful reform and readiness to question foundational social ideas, it is also anchored by the values of democracy, equality, and sustainability. Change cannot be considered “Progressive” if it does not begin and end with these values. More practically, to be Progressive means to embrace inter-organisational collaboration in order to create a broad coalition around the overlap between social liberalism and democratic socialism.

Sometimes, though, these values come into conflict with one another, such as in the long-standing opposition between individualism and collectivism. “Individualism” is a word often associated with the worst excesses of the neoliberal consensus and the principle cause of our fractured and insular society. But individual liberty and the right to self actualization is also one of the great achievements of the modern era and should not be taken for granted. On the other end of the spectrum, collectivism prioritises the needs of the community over those of the individual. This can sustain social stability, but can also be a source of intolerance and exclusion.

There is no doubt that unchecked individualism continues to have catastrophic social consequences, but collectivism can only serve us if it can also find a way to respect the individual. At Compass, we often say that the future must be negotiated, not imposed. Achieving such a feat would require a massive shifts in attitudes. We are, as a society, severely out of practice when it comes to communicating with each other. It’s getting easier and easier to stay in our bubbles, and harder and harder to debate properly with people we disagree with. We have amazing tools at our disposal to connect with other people, but our culture seems to be heading in the opposite direction.

To stick with the extreme individualism we’re used to is by definition not progressive because it is a continuation of the established order of things. Embracing collectivism at the expense of the individual, though, would arguably be regressive: a return to a less tolerant society. The Progressive approach is to recognise that value in both approaches and embrace the conflict between the two of them, but that doesn’t mean fudging the issue, suggesting that both approaches have merit, and hoping for the best. The challenge of transforming our culture into one that is able to hold the delicate balance between collectivism and individualism is not to be underestimated. Just as with the idea of progress as a whole, it’s likely to be a never completed task, but one that demands constant attention, reflection, imagination, and goodwill. This is the kind of hard-won transformation we’re talking about when we use the word “Progressive”.

Progressive Nationalism?

Another point of possible tension within British Progressive politics today concerns nationalism. This is a term often treated with suspicion by liberals after its association with the worst of humanity during the 1930s and 1940s, and with many harmful and destructive regimes today. How to square this, then, with the most successful nationalist party in the UK, the SNP, [claiming strong Progressive credentials?](#) To be clear, this paper is not trying to discuss whether the SNP can [legitimately claim to be a Progressive party](#) but rather to explore if it's possible to be Progressive and Nationalist. If it is, should we take seriously claims from the likes of Douglas Carswell that UKIP represented a Progressive politics?

As ever, these things generally come down to definitions. If we define nationalism very literally, as supporting the right of a particular nation to self-determination and pursuit of its interests, there is no reason why this thinking should be incompatible with Progressive aims. It feels reasonable to suggest that we all live within the borders of a nation, and we all would prefer that nation to prosper if possible. It is only when nationalism is used emotively, for a nation to pursue aims at the expense of "outsiders" that the incompatibility sets in. Some would argue that a nationalist movement can be internationalist in its outlook, especially in this interconnected world where national prosperity is closely linked.

We've already established that to be a Progressive requires a collaborative approach coupled with a respect for the individual. A philosophy which actively tries to generate hostility towards other groups therefore cannot be considered Progressive. This is why Carswell's argument that UKIP was a progressive force doesn't hold water, and illustrates the dividing line between Progressivism and Populism. What Carswell is really describing is a kind of "us and them" populism, as illustrated by the title of his book, ["Progress vs Parasites"](#).

Some Conclusions

This paper has interrogated the use of the word "Progressive" in British politics in an attempt to assess its continued appropriateness and utility for Compass. From assessing the historical background of the term, it is evident that we should continue to be critical of the "Progress for Progress' sake" philosophy, particularly when this relates to material or economic progress. [Compass' work on the Good Society](#) is useful in this regard. If we have a clear idea of where we want to go, and act in the full knowledge that means always shape ends, we can be critical and focussed on that kind of Progress we're demanding.

It must be conceded that, having been used as a political label by many

parties across the spectrum, the word has lost some of its power. We have seen how, despite its historical roots on the Left of British politics, describing yourself as Progressive can seem as empty now as suggesting that you are the candidate for “change”. This means we have to be intellectually honest about claiming ownership of this word, and clear about what it means to us through regular review of our values and actions. We know that the Good Society is in a constant state of becoming, and therefore so should we be as an organisation. Or in the words of Zygmunt Baumann, often quoted at Compass meetings, “The Good Society is the one that knows it is not good enough.” The key values of democracy, sustainability, and equality remain as relevant as ever and should continue to guide us, but we need to keep in our minds an idea of where we are going.

Even more importantly, we need to continue to rise to the challenge of Progressivism, always pushing towards bold and imaginative thinking in response to the ever complex problems of our times. In the last few months alone, the Coronavirus has brought policy proposals which were previously considered unthinkable, like [Basic Income](#), into the mainstream. It is only thanks to the truly progressive thinkers who championed Basic Income when it was considered a fantasy that the necessary conditions were created to usher it into the mainstream once its time came.

Since the spring of 2020 we’ve also seen nation states all over the world - for a short time at least - [prioritise human health and wellbeing over economic performance](#). We’ve seen the strengths of the State and civil society when they act together, and their limitations when they act alone. We’ve seen that people are willing to sacrifice some of their own freedom for the good of the whole, but also know when the time is right to stand up for themselves against an oppressive majority, as demonstrated by this summer’s Black Lives Matters protests. Many of the Progressive ideas discussed in this paper feel more pertinent than ever, but the last few months has shown that they do not exist in a static form. Perhaps what being a Progressive really means is to be always thinking, adapting and evolving, moving mindfully forward from what no longer serves us towards something which better reflects our core values.

Endnotes

- 1** For an in depth history of the ways in which the term "Progressive" has been used by most major parties in Britain in recent years, see chapter 7 in Robinson, E. (2017), *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain*, Macmillan.
- 2** Robinson, E. (2017). *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 31.
- 3** See for example. Gray, J. (2014), *The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths*, Penguin.
- 4** Robinson, E. (2017). *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 32.
- 5** For an introductory discussion of the Progressive movement in the USA, see <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/06/01/progressives-history-227037>
- 6** For an in-depth analysis see Blackburn et al (2010), *Who Governs?: Forming a coalition or minority government in the event of a hung Parliament*, Hansard Society, p17.
- 7** Peter Dorey (2003) *Between ambivalence and antipathy: the labour party and electoral reform*, *Representation*, 40:1, 15-28.
- 8** Robinson, E. (2017), *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 256.

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